ALWAYS REFORMING
October 31, 2010

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 98
Ephesians 4:1–6
Luke 5:33–39

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins."
Luke 5:37 (NRSV)

Church is not a stopping place but a starting place
for discerning God's presence in the world.
Church can help people gain a feel for how
God shows up, not only in Holy Bibles and
Holy Communion but also in near neighbors,
mysterious strangers, sliced bread, and
grocery store wine. That way when they leave church,
they no more leave God than God leaves them.

Barbara Brown Taylor
Leaving Church

In every generation, since the beginning of time,
your Spirit has stirred men and women to seek you.
We thank you for your people, your church, which has touched our lives,
some of us long ago, some of us recently.
We thank you for your church's amazing diversity,
its reach into every land, every culture, every race.
And we thank you for this church.
Now be with is as we listen for the word you have for us:
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

William Sloane Coffin said once that if he walked into a church as a visitor on a Sunday morning and the minister announced that it was Stewardship Sunday and he was going to preach a stewardship sermon, he, Coffin, would immediately bow his head and pray fervently for brevity. This is a

stewardship sermon, and if you wish to pray for brevity, I will understand, but it is also a sermon about the Church, Church with a capital C, and this church in particular. It is Reformation Sunday, an annual opportunity to think a bit about our history, but much more importantly, about the future and where we, this church and the whole Church, are going.

It has been suggested that stewardship is simply a church euphemism for fundraising. And it is that, but it is also much more than that. The best definition of stewardship is management. Stewardship is about how you and I manage our lives in their entirety. It is rooted in the uniquely Christian, and Jewish, notion that God creates human beings with the image of God in them and gives them responsibility for creation, for life in the garden in the ancient story, responsibility to till it, maintain it, help it thrive; the uniquely and incredibly important idea that our dignity and worth as human beings is in that image of God in us and that commission to be responsible managers of the garden, the world, our communities and institutions, and that special part of God's creation over which we have very specific management responsibility: our own individual lives. That's how expansive stewardship is: it is the giving of our lives and our resources of love and passion and imagination and money to causes and institutions that reflect our most precious values and actually practice the care for the world. So yes, it's fundraising, and yes, God wants your money: but more than that, God wants your intellect, your imagination, your passion, your love, which is to say, your heart. And the church, is the one place where that bracing, challenging, inspiring vision of who we are and what we are here for is taken with the utmost seriousness.

A good friend died the week before last. Bob Waddell was a successful insurance executive, a husband and father who loved his family, community, and church. He was the stewardship chair for several years in the church I served in Columbus. And every year Bob would come into my office, sit down, and say the same thing: "John, I think that we can do this if you would just stand up in the pulpit and say, 'Folks, if you give a lot of money to this church, I can promise you you'll go to heaven. And if you don't, you know where you're headed.' I know you can't say that, but if you could just once, and then say a nice little prayer and bring out the bagpipes to play 'Amazing Grace,' I think we can do this."

I think of Bob every year and what he used to say and knew, of course, was not possible—although being a pretty good student of church history, he

often would elaborate: “You know, selling indulgences like they used to do before the Reformation [pieces of paper you could buy to keep you and your loved ones from spending eternity in purgatory] is a really good fundraising idea.” I’ve come to realize the truth to which Bob’s good-natured humor pointed: that you and I have only one life to live and that the degree to which we live it with commitment and generosity, the degree to which we learn to give our lives away, is the degree to which we are serious about following Jesus Christ. Bob was right about that.

This church is remarkable, standing here on one of the busiest urban thoroughfares in the world, with its doors open every day to the world—a reminder to all who enter and to everyone who passes by that life is more than commerce and business and entertainment, that life is a gift God gives to be used responsibly. And so this church welcomes all—little children for support and tutoring, the very young and very old, singles and young marrieds struggling in the middle of life with heavy burdens of responsibility—and gathers weekly to be reminded that there is a God who loves us very much and has high hopes for us and expectations of us.

Let’s leave all the euphemisms behind. It costs about $10 million a year to do all that this church does, and you, members and friends, are the absolutely essential part of it. I cringe every time *Chicago Tribune* mentions anything about us because we are always described not as a big, diverse church that does a lot of good, but as one of Chicago’s wealthiest churches or, worse yet, a “tony” church, and I think, “Uh oh, there go twenty-five more givers.” There’s a myth out there that we are a wealthy church, that we have so much money in the bank that no one needs to give much, or that a few very wealthy individuals will carry most of the load. About 20 percent of our $10 million annual budget comes from invested funds given over the generations by faithful people. Another 20 percent or so comes from fees and other miscellaneous income, and about 60 percent must come from the gifts and contributions of our individual members and friends. We are about halfway there. Virtually 100 percent of the officers of this church have made their pledge.

So I invite you to join them, join Sue and me, in expressing your faith, your hopes, your values, your love for God and God’s world, and your intent to be a follower of Jesus Christ, by making a pledge, a generous gift that reflects all of that.

Reformation Sunday used to be an occasion for thinking about events that happened in Germany 500 years ago, bash the Pope, and trot out all the reasons we are grateful that we're not Catholic. Many of us, years ago, grew up in a climate of interfaith wariness that bordered on hostility. We weren't entirely sure Catholics were Christians, and they returned the compliment. Catholics weren't allowed to step inside Protestant churches. Protestants made fun of Latin Masses, confessionals, fish on Friday, and, in my household at least, held the weekly hope that the Notre Dame football team would lose on Saturday afternoon. Garrison Keillor, in his book *Life among Lutherans*, a collection of *Prairie Home Companion* monologues, says that for the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon, intolerance towards Catholics was part of the faith. "We believed Catholics were illiterate peasants, foreign born, who worshiped idols. . . . We weren't sure what it was that Catholics believed, but whatever it was, it wasn't right" (p. 170). Catholic-Protestant marriages used to be called mixed marriages, and the weddings themselves often became battles for religious supremacy. I was solemnly instructed in Sunday School to avoid all of that by not ever dating Catholic girls (which was fine with me, because I already had my eyes on a Lutheran).

All of that is past, thanks be to God. Not the Lutheran—that has turned out well for me. But there is an important truth that remains for all of us, and it began one day, long before the Reformation, when Jesus sat down for dinner in the home of a man named Levi. It happens early in the story. A young rabbi from Nazareth, beginning in his home synagogue, has begun to teach and preach in the villages of Galilee, announcing that the kingdom of God has come and with it a whole new way of being faithful to God. Wherever he goes, people are paying attention. He teaches love and forgiveness in addition to abiding by conventional religious rules and customs. He goes around telling people that love for their neighbors, care for the poor and the sick, accepting and welcoming those who are shut out by social custom and religion—people with leprosy, sinners, prostitutes—is more important to God than religious rituals and rules. He takes his religion seriously—so seriously that he wants to reform it, make it be what it intends to be. But to those most invested in the religious status quo, he looks and sounds for all the world like a troublemaker, maybe even subversive—particularly on that day when he sat down for dinner at Levi's table.

There's a back story here. Levi was a tax collector. The Romans had invented an innovative way to collect their taxes: they hired locals to do the

job for them, paid them generously, and allowed them to overcharge and skim a little off the top. It was lucrative. The only downside was that everybody hated you; you were a “collaborator,” a “traitor.” It was so bad that “tax collectors and sinners” go together as almost one word in the language of the day. Sinners meant anyone who simply didn’t pay attention to the religious law. Often they were poor people who were so busy trying to survive that they didn’t have time for religion. Sinners included beggars, petty thieves, people who were ritually unclean, prostitutes—not the kind of people with whom a respectable person would want to be associated.

One day, out of the blue. Jesus walked by one of these tax booths, looked the tax collector in the eye, said “Follow me,” and, of all the things, Levi, the tax collector, got up and followed. You can build a whole story about why Levi did what he did, about his religious journey or about his selling out his people, his nation and religion, for money; about his guilt; about the fact that he couldn’t look at himself in the mirror; about the fact that all his neighbors considered him a traitor and would have nothing to do with him. Maybe some of that was part of it. All the text says is that Levi got up from his counting table, walked away and followed Jesus, and was apparently so happy with his decision that the first thing he does is go home and plan a big dinner party. And who does he invite, this man everybody detests? He invites the only friends he has—that is, all those who don’t mind being seen with him: other tax collectors, sinners, panhandlers, beggars, and prostitutes and his newest friend, the young rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus. It must have been a boisterous party with lots of laughter. (See Eujoo Mary Kim*, Feasting on the Word* Year B, vol. 1.)

A few proper, upstanding, reputable, civic and religious leaders walk by, see and hear what is happening, see Jesus in there, in the middle of that motley crowd, and ask his disciples, “Why is he doing this: Why is he so disrespecting of our customs and rules?” Jesus overhears and says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician.”

They thought about that for a few minutes. They look again at the people who are now having a great time, truly enjoying themselves, eating, drinking out of big wine goblets, and decide to raise the stakes. “You know fasting and praying are very important to us. All your people seem to be interested in eating, drinking.” Now Jesus is engaged. Maybe he steps outside to talk to them; maybe he remains at the table and raises his voice.

> No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment: otherwise the old will be torn and the piece from the new will not match the old. . . . And no one puts new wine into old wineskins, otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine will be put in new wineskins.

There is an important organizational principle in that interchange. Great ideas inevitably create institutions to embody them, to celebrate and protect them, and to implement and express them publically. Monotheism is an abstraction until it creates a religion, creates a temple, creates a priesthood, creates rituals and creeds and practices. Representative democracy exists not in the abstract but in the institutions it creates: elected legislatures, branches of government, laws and regulations, a judicial system. An internal combustion engine that can power a vehicle in which people can ride in is just a dream until it creates a factory and workers and a management structure and a financial system and a sales force. And in every case the institution, over time, lives in tension with its founding idea, so much so that sometimes the institution itself, its preservation and protection, become the point of the exercise, without anybody realizing what has happened. Thomas Jefferson was so attuned to this dynamic in the eighteenth century that he said, “Every generation needs a new revolution.” So healthy institutions regularly invest time and resources in stepping back to remember what their basic business is and to ask if they are actually doing what they intend to do or if they are investing everything in institutional survival.

There is a fascinating book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why,* by an author with a charming name, Phyllis Tickle, a sociologist of religion. She observes that every 500 years the church, the institutional expression of Christianity, itself a reflection of the ideas and life of Jesus, has a giant rummage sale. Old traditions and structures, forms and practices, are discarded to make room for the new. Beginning with Jesus and the early church, every 500 years there has been a huge disruption, a major shift in the Christian Church: in 500, the fall of Rome and emergence of the papacy and monasticism; in 1000, the great schism between Eastern and Western Christianity, which resulted in Eastern Orthodoxy with its center in Constantinople and Roman Catholicism with its center in Rome; in 1500, the Protestant Reformation, which we remember today.

Phyllis Tickle says three things happen when the church holds an every-500-year rummage sale.

1. A new, vital form of Christianity emerges.
2. The older, dominant form is reconstituted into a less rigid and better expression, and it becomes stronger.
3. Each time the faith spreads dramatically.

On October 31, 1517, 493 years ago today, Martin Luther posted his ideas for the renewal and reformation of the church in which he was a priest, posted them on the castle church door in Wittenberg, Germany. He intended only to remind the church of its basic mission. The result was a new expression of the original idea, Protestantism. And a renewed Roman Church, which began, in the Counter-Reformation, to reconstitute itself, and, in fact, of Christianity spread far beyond its old boundaries. The Reformation not only brought new energy but major social change: reading the Bible in the vernacular led to schools and public education, which led to rationalism; artistically it led to congregational singing and the chorales of J. S. Bach. But it also brought the new individualism and, with that, divisiveness in the church. Where two or three Presbyterians are, there will be two or three ideas about what to do next. As soon as the Reformation happened, it splintered into branches—Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist—and it has kept on dividing and subdividing. There are half a dozen separate Presbyterian denominations in our country. In Korea, where the Protestant principle is taken very seriously, there are more than eighty separate Presbyterian denominations.

You can see what's coming. Phyllis Tickle argues that we are in the middle of an every-500-year rummage sale. Something new is being born, and we can't quite see what it is yet. Older, established structures, forms, and traditions are shaking, some declining and threatening to disappear. The Roman Catholic church is running out of clergy, out of priests and nuns, its backbone for centuries. Protestant denominations particularly are in a stage of transformation. They are a lot smaller than they used to be. There are exactly half the number of Presbyterians in our denomination as there were fifty years ago. The same is true for Chicago. Something is happening. New churches are emerging. New Christians are finding their way to new churches that don't look anything like what we think churches ought to look like. And here we are, with our English Gothic building and clergy in robes and people singing traditional hymns and, by the way, strong and growing.

So I have an idea to add to the every-500-year rummage sale. There are some items in the church's attic that we shouldn't sell, some things so valuable, so precious, that they must remain and be part of what is emerging, to remind whatever is about to be born what is good and faithful and helpful about this tradition. I have concluded that it is why we are here: to embody and keep alive the idea of Reformed, Protestant, Presbyterian Christianity. And I believe we are here not to give way to, but to participate in whatever is emerging out of the ferment that we have always believed is stirred up by the Holy Spirit.

I'm intrigued by an analysis of the traditional church's situation in a new book by Harvard's Robert Putnam, co-authored with David Campbell, *America's Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. There have been two seismic shifts in the culture of religion in recent years, Putnam and Campbell say.

The first was the '60s. The authors say, "In the wake of the sexually libertine 1960s, conservative religion grew in both size and prominence, including political prominence." And then there was a second seismic shift, a backlash: increasing number of Americans, especially young people, turned away from religion altogether as being judgmental, hung up on sex, and irrelevant to the world in which they were living, a new world.

So what's ahead? I think when you start to plan for the future, you go back to the past, to the very beginning, to your roots. I think there is a hint, a picture of what is emerging, what the Spirit of God is stirring up in our age, in that dinner party in Levi's house two thousand years ago: a religion and religious institution based not so much on getting its beliefs and rules right and theology orthodox as on getting Jesus right, as when he sat down at a tax collector's table; a religion and religious institution based not on keeping people out, away from the table, reserving sacraments for members only, ordination to those judged to be morally pure, but based on the Lord Jesus sitting down at a table with precisely those people his religion called impure, unfit, unclean.

I think the church that will emerge from the rummage sale will be as shockingly inclusive as Jesus was that day long ago, a church that will live out its life in the world as he did, its doors as open as his arms were, its heart as open to the world as his was, its resources as invested in caring for the world and its people as his resources of love and passion, of life and

blood that he poured out and gave on the cross. I think the church that is emerging will be as grateful and joyful and confident as his first disciples were after the reality of Easter resurrection sank in, a church that will be compelling because it is useful and faithful to its Lord, a church that knows how to give and to love as its Lord did.

I’m eager to see what is beginning to emerge, and here, on this busy intersection, in this church on the corner, with its heart and soul and arms open to the world, I am so very, very grateful to be part of it, and I commend it to you.

Amen.